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China and the Internet, Part 1: My Life as a Pirate

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China and the Internet, Part 1: My Life as a Pirate

Posted on **December 1, 2003** by **Editor**



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.01 **Introduction** ([return to Index](#))

After spending the period from December 2, 2003 to January 12, 2004 in China, I am writing a three-part series for Interface on what I have learned there. I first passed two days in San Francisco reading applications for Fulbright grants in Hong Kong, Korea, and Taiwan. Having had two Fulbright grants myself, I thought that this was very important work and saw it as a sort of obligatory service to the Fulbright selection committee, and to the profession. However, it turned out to be good preparation for my trip to China, because I looked over literally hundreds of grant applications for East Asia and got a good feeling for the sorts of topics of current interest to post-graduate students embarking, in many cases, upon a professional career in Asian Studies such as my own. While several are studying related topics, the number of applications bearing directly upon the impact of the Internet in Asia was quite small. This shows, I think, that this is first, not an easy topic for beginners to approach, and second, that the profession itself is still very conflicted about the means of studying the Internet, and the value of doing so. The value is questionable to young scholars, because the field itself still is very uncertain about the transition from hard copy to electronic publications.

After completing my work with the Fulbright selection committee, I left for China. I entered at Hong Kong, spent five days with old friends in Guilin, where I have been a frequent visitor since 1979, and where I lived several years while doing research. I then went onto the capital, Beijing,

and really dug into trying to understand the impact of the Internet in China. I operated, electronically speaking, out of several Internet cafes, where the equivalent of about 1.50 U.S. dollars bought a nice breakfast or lunch and an hour of Internet time, a good bargain anyplace.

I also met numerous Chinese Internet users who were very free with their opinions and advice. They were a creative lot, showing me quick ways to get around various obstacles to Internet use from China to my home sites at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon. They also introduced me to various commercial establishments in Beijing, mentioned below, where the consumer of hardware and software could find anything they might want. Taken together, these visits reveal an astonishingly lively and modern Internet/computing scene in Beijing, fully the equal of any large American city.

I also was well received at the American embassy, had several pleasant hours with the Webmaster there, and was invited to a party of international 20-somethings, many of whom were working in the communications industry in China. I will rarely tie insights received directly to the individuals who helped me in this editorial and those that follow, but I am grateful to everybody who assisted me.

From Beijing I went to Shanghai, where I continued my *modus operandi* as described above: Hours and hours in Internet cafes, visits to commercial sites, and interviews with professionals in the field. In Shanghai I met my wife, Christine Richardson, my daughter Clare Richardson-Barlow, and her friend Jasen Hartford, who was an invaluable resource to a Mac person trying to understand the mysteries of Windows, and in Chinese at that.

From Shanghai, we went to Wenzhou where Christine and I had been invited to teach at Wenzhou Medical College (WMC), a partner of Pacific University. There I taught "World Culture in the Age of the Internet" for three weeks, using a BBS and webpages in my classroom of 62 very bright and eager Sophomore English language majors at WMC. While Clare and Jason studied Kung-fu (Clare for her 13th year) and Chinese, Christine and I interacted with students and staff at WMC.

All of us spent days on the streets, and many nights watching DVDs. These included everything from recent Chinese films, some of which focus on electronic communications (such as the current best-seller "Cell-Phone," both a very popular book and a film that raises many issues of concern to any highly "wired" individual, Chinese or American), to pirated American movies shot with a hand-held digital video camera in an American movie theater before being reproduced in China.

Jasen and I have also sampled dozens of computer games, many legal ones of Chinese, Korean, and American origins, and many less legal ones of dubious origins. In this first installment, I report on "My Life As A Pirate" and what I have learned about the impact of the Internet.

.02 **Weighing Anchor** ([return to Index](#))

My life as a pirate began in Taiwan in 1967-8 with my first Fulbright grant. I had been awarded a Fulbright to study in Vietnam, but as the war heated up, our group, training in Vietnamese language at the University of Washington, was cancelled and the members told to select other more welcoming destinations in Asia. As I had several years of studying Chinese, and was working on a China-related research topic that would become my Ph.D. dissertation, “Vietnam and the Chinese Revolution of 1911,” I found it easy to relocate to Taiwan.

Taiwan was at that time in the early stages of what would prove to be a breathtakingly rapid period of evolution from a third world country to a vibrant “Asian Tiger,” a developmental model for subsequent Tigers such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Korea. Part of this process was a real interest in all things American, including American entertainment.

In Taipei, there was emerging a pirate recording industry which took recent foreign LPS and turned them into brightly colored red, green, and yellow disks, looking like gigantic lifesavers with photocopied covers, which sold for less than a dollar. The quality of the sound was usually quite low too, as the recording industry was still in its early days and usually amounted to running a tape recorder in front of speakers to obtain masters before cutting the vinyl. I tracked down one entrepreneur and asked him why he didn’t introduce more records from the Bay area, such bands as the Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Big Brother and the Holding Company, etc, in lieu of English bands—the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were everywhere.

Driven by a commendable cultural patriotism as well as the scent of some interesting insights, I offered to provide original records if the agent would pay for purchase price and mailing costs. I was soon the musical arbiter of taste in Taiwan; I rocked, and rolled. This was to be a brief tenure, however, as my contact was insatiable with his demands for new records, my purchasing and mailing crew in the United States (my mother) easily fatigued, and my local agent had abysmal taste. As I recall we soon parted ways over the Bee Gees, since I refused to be a part of introducing them to Taiwan. Fortunately, Michael Jackson was not yet even a child star, so our separation was a bloodless one. Scenting ever-greater profits, he found more accommodating partners, and I retired to my studies.

Another element of piracy in Taiwan at this time was the showing of American films. Because Taiwan then had severe strictures against emotional outbursts such as kissing, and anything even hinting at the human body was strictly forbidden, these films were very often cut. They also had to run exactly 100 minutes as the schedule for showing films was the same every day; every two hours the theaters emptied and refilled. This led to curious screenings in which lovers were oddly discrete. Plot was completely sacrificed to the rigid schedules. For example, the Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” which ran well over two hours in the original versions, in Taiwan consisted of nothing but an unrelieved series of gunfights between people who, in most cases, seemingly had never met. I suppose the Chinese audience saw this as an American version of clan feuds, who knows?

.03 **Avast, Scurvy Knaves** ([return to Index](#))

Continued visits to Asia following 1978-79 have kept me abreast of the development of the computer industry in Taiwan and China, which I have discussed in previous editorials (1). I have used computers, and taught their use in educational environs in China for some years. I have also seen China go from so poor that it beggars description, to a country so wealthy that computers are now regarded as a necessity in most upwardly mobile families, whose numbers are now in the hundreds of millions. Before coming to Wenzhou, I had never really heard anything at all about the city. I find it a city of seven million that has developed largely in the last twenty years. It is several hundred miles from Shanghai (connected by ten commuter shuttle flights per day), and has daily flights to Italy, where Wenzhou's shoes and other leather products are a key component in the Italian fashion industry.

Wenzhou University City, where we teach, is a campus of several schools and colleges encompassing hundreds of acres at the foot of Cha Shan (Tea Mountain). The WMC campus there is modeled architecturally on Harvard, except it is all brand new and extremely modern (and few of Harvard's facades are highlighted in tasteful purples or bright greens). Many Harvard students would probably prefer WMC's dorms to their own. There will eventually be more than fifty thousand students studying there, all in brand new modern educational plants. The vista from my third floor classroom of new buildings is broken for as far as the eye can see only by construction cranes putting up still more new buildings.

Our colleagues in the Department of English are relatively fluent, and up to date on the latest research and pedagogical controversies in the United States. My classroom has Internet access and a first rate teaching station with a recent model digital projector. My sixty-two students are intelligent, highly motivated, and endlessly curious.

Looming over this bucolic educational scene, however, is the Jolly Roger— the dread spectacle of piracy. Many of these students eagerly collect recent American movies and some have collections of hundreds of DVDs, for which they have usually paid less than one U.S. dollar. Their computers are doubtless clogged with pirated software as well. Certainly "Counter-Strike" is the game of the hour, as on American campuses. (2)

To the American film and software industry this is an indication that Scurvy Knaves are making off with millions in purchase prices and royalties. This is a serious topic, particularly to those film company executives who perform simple exercises in multiplication such as: (10,000 DVDs of title X sold in China = a loss to American producer of 10,000 X U.S. purchase price of 29.95= 299,950.00.) Arrgh, me hearties, we are talking more than a few doubloons here! But unfortunately such simple calculations ignore many more complex cultural issues. So my response is, "heave to, Billy boy," you know not whereof you fear. This is an industry that is totally evanescent, and not a market lost—that is, there is not really a market here for U.S. standard products at anything resembling U.S. prices.

By working at a very good job here in retail, say at Colonel Sanders or MacDonalds (each more than familiar with my family's expensive appetites), a Chinese teen-ager can earn almost three

dollars a day. One clerk we heard about worked all day for three dollars, but unknowingly accepted a fake one hundred yuan note, which was immediately deducted from her pay. As one hundred yuan is about twelve dollars U.S (1 USD = 8.2 Yuan or RMB)., she therefore owed the firm another several days' work; this is the custom here to prevent counterfeiting rings from passing money through gainfully employed friends and relatives at busy fast food outlets like these.

Anybody imagining that these consumers would be willing and able to pay more than one dollar several times per month for a pirated American movie should spend a couple of hours in the earsplitting environs of a Chinese fast-food outlet and ask themselves what sort of being would trade a week working there to view a two-hour legitimate copy of an American film. Trust me, we don't want that market. American films would go from "Dumb, Dumber, and Dumbest" to "Outrageously Out of Touch with Reality" with unfortunate results for our stateside audiences.

Moreover, these pirates are laughably incompetent. The Taiwanese pirated record industry of the 1960's was similar, a hit-and-miss jerry-rigged industry. Let me quote from the box notes of my Chinese copy of "Matrix Revolution:"

"... There is nothing left of what marvellous (sic) the first "Matrix" was: Great characters, amazing SPFX with a real and interesting mythology. The "Revolutions" destroyed all that and becomes a real pain in the ass moviemaking experience."

I can only presume that some American film buff found him or her-self torn, as I was in Taiwan, between introducing the cinematic equivalent of the Bee Gees to Chinese audiences and losing his or her job. Had I conceived of writing liner notes of this sort for the Bee Gees, I might still be the Pirate Lord of Taiwan.

Our copy of "Lord of the Rings, Part III" was apparently shot in a darkened U.S. theater with a hand-held digital camera. Audible comments from disgusted neighbors of the pirate camera operator can clearly be heard. And our copy of "The Last Samurai"—our second copy, the first one we purchased would not run at all—has appended to it the film credits from "The Blue Crush."

At odd moments in other films, the pirate editors decide that some scenes have gone on too long and simply delete them. Some characters seem to have been abducted by aliens as they are simply never seen again after their initial introduction.

There is also a technical issue. Most of these copies, perhaps all, are "single layered" DVDs and do not carry the rich information of the conventional American double-layered DVD. The quality is most usually actually less than that of broadcast television rather than better. To produce better copies would be far more expensive both to produce and to purchase.

Moreover, current attempts to cure pirating are everywhere evident in the copies: For example,

our copy of “Seabiscuit” has in every frame one of the following messages, alternating between the top and the bottom of the screen:

“Property of Universal”

“If you have rented or purchased this DVD call 1-800-NOCOPYS (1-800 662-6797)”

“For sales screening purposes only. Final content and functionality of this DVD may differ on final product.”

The Chinese pirate producers, not without their own sense of humor, gravely translated these messages into Chinese in the subtitles the first several moments they each appeared.

It is true that there are some who do have the money to purchase American first-run DVDs and might well do so. But a problem rears its head: The U.S. industry resolutely refuses to supply subtitles in Chinese. Spanish, yes; sometimes even, shudder, French, but Chinese? The pirates themselves provide the subtitles, resulting in some additional howlers as Chinese is warped and twisted to convey English dialogue. The Gettysburg Address would come out, “Uhh, many brave heroes lie tragic deadly”

And let’s do a bit of math again: (Estimated legitimate sales of “Seabiscuit” if no pirate copies were available: 1,000 copies for all of China (at most) = 29,950.00 – the cost of translation, providing subtitles and digital copies, and repackaging and distributing for the Chinese market = net profit somewhere well south of the red bottom line...)

The computer software market is a bit more complex, but my researches in Beijing, Shanghai, Guilin, and Wenzhou convince me that the Chinese government is taking this issue more and more seriously. Pirate software is relatively open in Shanghai and Guilin night markets, but difficult to find in Beijing. I was led down Chinese Hutongs (alleys) by anxious entrepreneurs who were continually scanning for police while promising digital delights. They usually turned out to be selling European pornography rather than Microsoft products—I actually saw very few of these. Such copies as I did see were outdated and their usability suspect. I doubt very much that they would satisfy anyone with a need for “Office 2000” for more than a few uses before the purchaser went looking for a legitimate version, available in most large bookstores and department stores, together with manuals in Chinese.

And the same cultural issues of translation are important here, too. It may be that the very largest American game forges lose some sales to counterfeit games, but again, few Chinese young people could afford the originals. If anybody is losing serious money to computer game piracy in China, it is probably first, the Koreans, who produce most of the really popular games, and secondly the Chinese themselves. I have several pirate copies of legitimate Chinese computer games such as “Divine Sword of the Tang Dynasty”. Let the Chinese police this industry themselves, it is to their advantage to do so. At the same time, it clearly is important to

keep pressure on the Chinese government to police egregious examples of piracy of expensive software packages. We cannot have Chinese state offices installing pirated copies of U.S. produced software suites, for example. But outraged congressmen might best spend their time dealing with issues more important than these.

.04 **Haul to, Lubbers** ([return to Index](#))

And, in conclusion, let's think just a bit about the advantages of piracy. This, of course, seems a forbidden topic, but there are, I think, more than a few such advantages. One of these is preparing for a market that, while now unable to afford legal copies, is maturing very rapidly. The Chinese teenager who engaged me in an eager discussion of the great American films in a pirate DVD outlet, and a very sophisticated discussion at that—he prefers Al Pacino to Robert DeNiro on the basis of a complicated evaluation of their complete oeuvres—will someday be able to afford legal copies, and will buy American films rather than Japanese or Korean ones, also easily available here. And, surely there is some advantage to us in the fact that he is learning English as he watches and can use the Internet for future purchases in English.

There is also the issue of “soft power,” the means whereby the United States painlessly and profitably influences other cultures and markets.⁽³⁾ American films carry American values, and Chinese audiences, no matter how much they may, with appropriate politeness and restraint, subtly voice their disapproval of such U.S. foreign policy peccadilloes as the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, still love American culture, which they frequently encounter from pirated products that are cheaply and widely distributed. ⁽⁴⁾

Jeffrey Barlow
Editor, *Interface*

.05 **Notes** ([return to Index](#))

[1] See, for example, The Internet, R&D, and U.S. policy in the Taiwan Straits. PART I OF II at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/01/edit.php>

[2] For the impact of Counter-Strike in U.S. high schools, see: “Counter Strike Culture” by Jesse Snyder at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2003/08/snyder.php>

[3] For a fuller discussion of this topic, see “American Power, Globalism, and the Internet: Editorial Essay”, found at: <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2002/03/editorial.php>

[4] See U.S. State Department report at: <http://hongkong.usconsulate.gov/>

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5 THOUGHTS ON "CHINA AND THE INTERNET, PART 1: MY LIFE AS A PIRATE"

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